

THE NIGHT WATCH

tion. "Do you think we're trying to assassinate Fidel Castro?"

"I certainly do not," I answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Just some rumors I've heard," he said. "I wouldn't want to be involved in anything like that." Then, "If we were would you know about it?"

"Not necessarily," I said. "But that would be dumb. It couldn't change anything in Cuba, except maybe to put power in the hands of people even more pro-Soviet and less predictable than Fidel."

"Yeah." The young officer shrugged. "Probably just rumors."

The conversation was unsettling. After returning to Mexico I didn't think of it again until I heard a vignette concerning Des FitzGerald from a traveler. It involved a party in Chevy Chase, a Washington suburb, a short time before FitzGerald became the DDP. Several Agency employees were there as well as people from other agencies and outside government; about twenty guests in all. The host had brought in a palmist to read the guests' past and future. Of all the guests only Des FitzGerald refused to extend his palm to be read.

That was strange, I thought when hearing of the incident. Of all the people I had met in the CIA the ebullient and fun-loving FitzGerald was at the top of the list most likely, under such circumstances, to go along with the crowd.*

The most crucial development during my four-year assignment in Mexico City occurred slightly past midtour, in the fall of 1963. Just another blip on the station's radar screen. It did not seem important when we first noticed it.

The slight, sallow man boarded a bus in Laredo, Texas.

* When the Senate Church Committee released its report on assassination plots against foreign leaders in 1975, it revealed that on the day President Kennedy was killed in Dallas FitzGerald had offered a poison pen device to a CIA agent identified as AM/LASH. This was inaccurate, as FitzGerald was not in Paris on November 2, 1975, but he had met the agent in the French capital previously to encourage him to get rid of Fidel Castro.

How about the night
date, 1/10/75?

178

Mexico 1962-1964

He arrived the next morning in Mexico City, after the grueling twenty-hour trip, and registered at a cheap hotel—less than \$2.00 a day—not far from the bus station. He was one of the many faceless tourists who visit Mexico from the United States; on any given day there may be five thousand of them in Mexico City. Most visit the Aztec ruins, the art galleries, the marvelous anthropological museum, and frequently the capital's restaurants and nightclubs. The CIA has neither the inclination nor the time to observe them.

A few American tourists stop by foreign embassies. At some, especially the Soviet and Cuban embassies, these travelers appear as blips on the CIA radar screen. This particular tourist, tired as he must have been after the all-night bus ride, immediately began to contact the Cuban and Soviet missions.

None of the CIA personnel in Mexico City knew anything about Lee Harvey Oswald; that he had previously lived in the Soviet Union and married a Russian wife. He was just another blip. How much attention should be paid to him?

"Craig," the case officer in charge of Soviet operations, was the first to become aware of Oswald on the basis of the latter's contact with the Soviet embassy. The circumstances were such—Oswald wished to return to the Soviet Union via Cuba—that a cable to headquarters asking for a Washington file check on Oswald was in order. Craig procrastinated as he was busy with other things. One of his assistants prodded Craig several times; his aide was his own wife, working part-time for the station because of her extensive knowledge of Russian and Soviet matters, garnered when she was a CIA staff officer prior to their marriage. Finally Craig's wife typed out the cable herself, dropping it on her husband's desk for his review before it went to Win Scott for release. Who, the cable asked Washington, is Lee Henry Oswald?

It was seven weeks later, early afternoon on the twenty-second of November 1963, that I was called from my desk by a secretary who said that someone from the defense attaché's office wanted to speak to the CIA duty

179

Although officials decided years ago that there was no real spy activity in Mexico City or in any other city in the world, they picked up by me

THE NIGHT WATCH

officer. I went out to see the sergeant who waited at the Dutch door.

"My wife just telephoned to say she heard on the radio that President Kennedy has been shot in Dallas. Have you people heard anything about it?"

We had not. As CIA officers picked up the story during the lunch hour—the news swept through Mexico City—they returned to the station. We gathered in Win's office to listen to the radio and monitor television reports on the tragedy.

The death of the president was finally confirmed, and then came the news that the assassin had been apprehended: Lee Harvey Oswald.

"That's the man we sent the cable about," Win said quietly, and called his secretary. From memory he gave her several file numbers, and she went off to fetch them.*

For the next several weeks the station was occupied with reviewing all available intelligence concerning Oswald's visit to Mexico City and the events in the Cuban and Soviet embassies then and afterward. There were, and still are, some missing pieces in the puzzle, but the final accumulation and interpretation provided a reasonably clear picture. Some knowledge was gained while Oswald was in Mexico, some after he left, and even more after Kennedy's death gave the matter top priority among our activities. The tedious collection and storage of trivia paid off.

In the United States there seems to be a compulsive tendency to suspect conspiracy in the face of facts not easily explained. As some of the details of the CIA coverage of Oswald in Mexico have been, at least until recently, confidential, the swarm of skeptics who have found a lucrative profession in conning lecture audiences

* Author Tad Szulc, in his book about Howard Hunt, *Compulsive Spy*, writes that Hunt was the Acting Chief of Station in Mexico City when Lee Harvey Oswald visited there. He refers to this as "an extraordinary coincidence." In fact, Hunt was not even in Mexico, but Win Scott was, and in charge. He retired in Mexico and lived there until his death from a heart attack.

Mexico 1962-1964

and writing ludicrous books with bizarre explanations of conspiracy have, of course, combined the true with the false in coming up with conspiracy theories on the "Mexico City connection" of Oswald. Some of these may seem plausible. In fact, I know of no evidence to suggest that Oswald acted as an agent for the Cubans or Russians, that he was a CIA agent, or that any aspect of his Mexico City trip was any more ominous than reported by the Warren Commission.

Some of those who do so well financially lecturing before college groups on this subject claim that a "mystery man" was in Mexico City, pretending to be Lee Harvey Oswald. They are right in that there was a mysterious person, with the physical appearance of an American, who was in Mexico City and in contact with the Soviet embassy at the same time Oswald was there.

In writing that first cable from Mexico City about Oswald, Craig's wife described Lee "Henry" Oswald as "approximately 35 years old, with an athletic build, about six feet tall, with a receding hairline." She had put together two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which appeared compatible but which did not, in fact, fit together. We had learned of a contact Oswald made with the Soviet embassy, asking the Russians if they had any news on his application to return to the Soviet Union. Craig's wife, incorrectly, surmised that the contact was made by another person, photographed as an individual of interest because he had frequented the Soviet embassy. She was describing the mysterious stranger and not, as found later, the person making the contact. She had put one (Oswald, seeking a visa from the Soviets) and one (an unknown visitor to the Russian embassy) together and come up with an incorrect two: the assumption that the two men were the same. If that second person, the hefty fellow with an athletic build, would present himself today, like a Rip Van Winkle, it would be useful to all of us. Meantime he remains a mystery figure, who could be, from his appearance, an American—or could be a Soviet or Nordic seaman from any ship docked in a Mexican port.

THE NIGHT WATCH

Why did that first cable identify Lee "Henry" Oswald? Because Craig's wife did not read about Oswald, but heard about him. It was her phonetic observation. In any event, it became apparent to the CIA before the assassination of Kennedy that a mistake had been made: a message from CIA in Washington to the U.S. Navy requested photographs of the real Lee Harvey Oswald "to determine if the Lee Oswald in Mexico City and subject are the same individual."

Another speculative assertion of the conspiracy buffa was that Oswald made a secret air flight to Havana. There is not a single piece of evidence to support this allegation, and much to prove it untrue.

Several skeptics have said Oswald returned with several thousand dollars from Mexico. I think I know where that came from.

After President Kennedy was assassinated there was a walk-in to the American embassy in Mexico City. He was a young Nicaraguan, who said that he had been inside the Cuban embassy when Oswald visited there, and that he saw a red-haired black pay Oswald \$6,500 in American money, an advance payment presumably for his role as the hired gun in killing Kennedy. I was surprised when, in response to a cable we sent to Managua, capital of Nicaragua, our station said that the Nicaraguan intelligence service had identified the walk-in as a prominent Nicaraguan Communist. It seemed strange as we had no information on the man in our 3-by-5 cards. John and I were assigned to interrogate him. It soon was apparent that he was lying, and not very well. A lie-detector test—a specialist was flown down from Washington—soon confirmed that he was a fabricator. The Mexican government talked seriously with him. He finally claimed, after four days, that he had made up the story because he hated Fidel Castro and hoped that his story would provoke the United States into taking action against Castro. (I have a theory, almost a conviction, that in fact this man was dispatched to Mexico City by the Somoza brothers, the authoritarian but pro-American rulers of Nicaragua, in what they considered a covert action to influence the

Official US weekly reports I think including CIA from Mexico, call him a Nicaraguan agent.

Mexico 1962-1964

American government to move against Cuba. If so, it was a nice try, but a transparent operation.) *

Finally, there has been much talk of photographs taken of Oswald by the CIA in Mexico City. There were none. A capability for such photographic coverage existed, but it was not a twenty-four-hour-a-day, Saturday and Sunday capability. John and I spent several days studying literally hundreds of photographs available to the CIA before and during Oswald's trip to Mexico City. He did not appear in any of them.

The facts about Oswald's Mexico City visit, obvious to me and anyone who knew all the details, were simple. Oswald tried to return to the Soviet Union by way of Cuba. The Cubans and the Soviets rebuffed him. They thought he was a kook. Oswald went back to Dallas, alone, on another bus.

I know a great deal about Oswald's stay in Mexico, much of it learned by questioning agents, reviewing the record, and coming to a conclusion based on many disparate items of information. While I certainly can't be sure Oswald was not involved in some sort of conspiracy back in Dallas, I am confident that he was not recruited in Mexico City by the Soviets or the Cubans to assassinate Jack Kennedy.**

* The Warren Commission Report describes this man as "a young Latin American secret agent."

** It was revealed in 1975 that Oswald wrote a letter to the FBI in Dallas threatening to blow up the Dallas police station. This was several days before the assassination. Foreign intelligence services do not have their assassins bring such attention upon themselves just before the hit. Also, in 1975, a poll showed that 85 percent of the American people believed that Oswald was somehow a part of a conspiracy in Dallas. I am one of the 15 percent which believes that he acted alone, and that the Warren Commission was right. Despite the motivation Fidel Castro might have had after learning of plots against his life, I am convinced he did not select Oswald as an instrument in an attempt against Kennedy. To date there is no evidence that the Cuban dictator tried to kill the American president. In 1964, Senator Richard Schweiker, who has become an assassin's ally, was primarily responsible for a report which raised all sorts of doubts about the Kennedy assassination but no evidence. I testified in executive session before Senator Schweiker and his staff about the circumstances of Oswald's visit to Mexico City and the investigation by

THE NIGHT WATCH

The CIA information about the nondescript visitor to Mexico City was passed to a number of other United States government agencies—before the assassination. With a little luck, it might have reached the Secret Service and it might have prevented the assassination of Jack Kennedy.

Good news from Langley in February 1965. I had been promoted to GS-15, the highest of the middle-grade ranks of CIA officers.

We had kidded Wally and his wife when he was assigned as DCOS in Santo Domingo, an unimportant, backwater post. It did not seem so amusing when, in March 1965, a cable arrived advising me that I was to have my first Chief of Station assignment—COS, Santo Domingo. The stimulating four years in Mexico were at an end. I was to report to Washington at once, to attend a two-week course of training for first-time Chiefs of Station.

The Dominican Republic? While I was pleased to be appointed a COS and to have a chance to move up the management ladder, I was distressed at the prospect of a tour on the Caribbean island. Santo Domingo, I feared, would be a dull post.

me and "John" following the assassination. I was surprised and disappointed when I read the published Senate report, which I felt was not completely objective. Certainly it did not make the Warren Commission Report "collapse like a house of cards" as Senator Schweiker had predicted it would.

*"to assist in the shoring up of our best regime" the military
dictatorship that had been our previous elected government?
And LBJ took on the basis of false CIA information, that
the opposition to the military
dictatorship was
Communist. Under his own feet, "Wally"*

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 1965-1967

Believing that gunboat diplomacy was a thing of the past in Latin America, I was surprised in late April of 1965 when United States Marines landed on the outskirts of Santo Domingo to protect and evacuate the American citizens gathered at the Hotel Embajador. That trauma—Marines who had occupied the country in 1906 and 1916 were once again on Dominican soil—was enough of a shock. Now I was stunned to hear Lyndon Johnson announcing that the army's 82nd Airborne Division would join the Marines.

The President of the United States, I told myself, has lost his mind. What would the reaction be throughout Latin America when the headlines erupted the next day? How could American prestige ever be recovered in the hemisphere? But Lyndon Johnson saw the Dominican Republic and the revolt that broke out there in late April of 1965 as a part of a larger problem which included a Communist Cuba ninety miles from Florida and an escalating American involvement in Southeast Asia.

I was in Washington to attend the training course for first-time Chiefs of Station preparatory to transferring to Santo Domingo to relieve our Chief who had a serious medical problem with a bad back. Desmond FitzGerald had chosen me because he foresaw a situation where a political action program in support of the shaky incumbent regime might be needed.

The history of the Dominican Republic was dreary. Achieving independence from Spain in 1844, things went so poorly for the larger half of the island of Hispaniola (Haiti shares it) that the Dominicans went back to Madrid, sombrero in hand, pleading to be readmitted to